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Early Interventions of Perfectionist Behaviors in the Gifted Learner

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EARLY INTERVENTIONS OF PERFECTIONIST BEHAVIORS IN THE GIFTED LEARNER

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APRIL 26, 2013**

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	3
Introduction.....	3
Literature Review	5
Defining Perfectionism and Its Causes.....	5
Negative and positive perfectionism.....	5
Gifted children and perfectionism.....	7
Causes of perfectionism.....	8
Perfectionism in the Classroom.....	10
Interventions.....	12
Research Questions.....	14
Methodology	14
Informal Gifted Identification.....	15
Identifying Perfectionists.....	15
Classroom Interventions.....	17
Analysis of Results.....	19
Pre Intervention Responses	19
Post Intervention Responses	23
Conclusions	27
Recommendations.....	28
References	31
Appendix A	34
Appendix B	36

Abstract

Research has shown that gifted children are, as a group, perfectionists (Neihart, Reis, Robinson & Moon, 2002). While there is no direct correlation between gifted students and perfectionism it is strongly linked in several other studies (Adelson, 2007; Chan, 2003 (Neumeister, Williams, & Cross, 2007). Perfectionism is a compulsive behavior that debilitates students, leaving them emotionally unable to complete a task or be satisfied with their final product (Adelson, 2007) . Even though research shows perfectionism is a struggle for gifted learners (Neumeister, Williams, & Cross, 2007), many teachers do not address these emotional needs. The *Multidimensional Perfectionist Scale*, developed by Frost, Marten, Lahart and Rosenblate (2006) was used as the basis for the questions asked of the students. Through observation, research, and student journaling, I implemented a variety of coping strategies for perfectionist behaviors to determine which were most effective in the lower elementary gifted learner. The final project includes a report of the findings of the best intervention and coping strategies for early elementary students with perfectionism.

Introduction

Early identification of issues is important for children's success. This research explored the relationship between early gifted learners and perfectionism to determine causes of perfectionism and ways to develop coping skills to aid in the success of learners with perfectionism. The goal of the research was to find intervention strategies to use in the classroom that will lessen perfectionist tendencies for early-learners.

Perfectionism is defined as the inability to find anything acceptable that is less than perfect (Adelson, 2007). People with perfectionism correlate their self-worth and happiness to achievement. The goals and standards set by a learner with perfectionism are typically unrealistically high and very unattainable. When these goals are not met a person with perfectionism feels a sense of personal worthlessness and loss (Christopher & Shewmaker, 2010).

Gifted children have a difficult time when getting the wrong answer and want to be perceived as intelligent at all times (Adelson, 2007; Chan, 2004). While there are many studies conducted on anxiety and self esteem in children, the studies of gifted children only make up a small portion of this field (Tippy & Burnham, 2009). Research shows that gifted children have a high perfectionist nature because they are always striving to be impossibly perfect (Chan, 2004). Gifted children often attempt to obtain goals that are physically impossible, are so used to the ease of success because of being under challenged early in their education, and often compare themselves to older peers. These behaviors lead to the inability to be “perfect” at an older age. Students become fixated on making perfect scores instead of on their learning leading to a dissatisfaction when outcomes are not perfect (Neihart, Reis, Robinson & Moon, 2002).

Contrary to popular beliefs, these children need individualized attention and help with their emotional needs and learning styles. By recognizing and identifying these needs, their education can become more meaningful (Christopher, 2010). Many teachers leave gifted learners to themselves and assume that because they score well on academic tests that their schooling needs are being met (Adelson, 2007). Students may be reduced to tears

because they do not know the answer right away. If these students do not learn how to fail and recover from that failure at an early age, they manifest failing and become highly self-critical learners (Adelson, 2007). When some students begin to feel the pressure of always succeeding they become apathetic learners (Adelson, 2007), similar to attributes given to children with learning disabilities (Chan, 2007). For example, they stop taking risks in their learning, they give up easily and feel overly stressed in the classroom in order to perform up to the teacher's or parent's high standards (Chan, 2009). The foundation for perfectionist behaviors is based on obsessing over failures and focusing on lack of achievements. Students who experience these feelings early on develop perfectionist tendencies for the rest of their lives. A review of scholarly literature and case studies were conducted on causes and coping implications for perfectionist gifted learners.

Literature Review

This literature review focuses on perfectionist behaviors in learners which are broken down into the following categories: defining perfectionism, causes of perfectionism, perfectionism in the classroom and interventions. Research indicates that it is important to recognize and intervene in these behaviors in gifted children. Most of the studies conducted are on high school students, thus the focus of this study is on the effect of lower elementary students.

Defining Perfectionism and Its Causes

Negative and positive perfectionism. Chan (2007) looks at learners' self-view through perfectionism in two ways, 1) negative or neurotic and 2) positive perfectionism. The

successful perfectionist is a person who learned to use his/her perfectionism in a positive way, despite his or her tendencies (Cross & Cross, 2012). These perfectionists have taught themselves coping strategies to deal with the negative feelings of anxiety and lack of the feeling of personal achievement. They learn to concentrate on what has been achieved, unlike negative perfectionist who focus on what else might have been achieved if everything had gone perfectly (Gnilka, Ashby, & Noble, 2012). Many people see perfectionism as a negative trait but positive perfectionism can help motivate the student to achieve more (Neihart, Reis, Robinson & Moon, 2002). Some researchers suggest that people can use their perfectionism as a positive force allowing them to reach goals that seem unachievable to others (Christopher & Shewmaker, 2012). Positive perfectionists can be highly successful, but it is in spite of their perfectionism, not because of it, that they are successful (Neihart, Reis, Robinson, & Moon, 2002). Unfortunately, these people make up the minority of perfectionists.

Negative perfectionism is defined as the strict following of high personal standards and holding high expectations for others. While it is not considered a psychological condition on its own (Cross & Cross, 2012), it is psychologically unhealthy (Neihart, Reis, Robinson & Moon, 2002). Instead of allowing creative contributions and new components to one's work, perfectionist behaviors cause frustration, paralysis, and fear (Cross & Cross, 2007; Neihart, Reis, Robinson & Moon, 2002,), which may inhibit perfectionists from achieving their best work (Ashby, & Bruner, 2005). Rather than creating and contributing new ideas to the work place, perfectionists tend to stay with what they know in fear of not completing a task perfectly. Their inability to take risks and lack of confidence in their own ideas and products create an environment where perfectionists never reach their full

potential. Negative perfectionism is a neurotic tendency to achieve perfection, and anything less than perfect is perceived as a failure. Many of its symptoms are compared with obsessive compulsive disorder because many perfectionists obsess over perfection (Oliver, Ross, & Katz, 2001). Negative perfectionists may become overwhelmed with the need to be perceived as perfect. When perfectionists do not seek help or learn coping strategies the outcome can be devastating.

Perfectionism is debilitating and those who go without treatment or intervention are less likely to be successful in life because the anxiety caused by this condition limits them from exploring and reaching their full potential (Cross & Cross, 2012). Children affected by negative perfectionism may experience many emotional problems such as depression, anxiety and even suicide (Reis, 2004). Perfectionism is very difficult to tackle and cope with by oneself. That is why it is important to recognize it in others and help them with this self-destructive behavior (Cross & Cross, 2012).

Gifted children and perfectionism. Gifted children are much more likely to develop perfectionist behaviors than their peers (Neihart, Reis, Robinson & Moon, 2002). However, because their perfectionist tendencies can be seen as a driving force in high achievement, this condition goes untreated. Many students hide their tendencies and feel shameful about their urge to be perfect or their inability to achieve perfection. In addition, some students may be unchallenged in their early years because some students are not identified as gifted until third grade or later. This leads to many gifted students who may be unchallenged in their early elementary years. Children who experience an extremely high success rate early on develop unrealistic outcomes for life and learning experiences

(Neumeister, 2003). Ongoing perfectionism behaviors lead to fear, self-loathing, anxiety and can manifest into suicide, ensuring that these children never reach their full potential (Cross & Cross, 2012).

Causes of perfectionism. Research is divided on the cause of perfectionism: nature or nurture? Some believe perfectionism is innate such that people with perfectionism were born that way. There have been many extensive studies on the causes of perfectionism as it relates to nurture (Chan, 2005; Neumeister, et al 2007). In 2012, Hibbard and Walton administered a qualitative study comparing perfectionists and nonperfectionist. The two groups were asked about how they felt about personal achievements. While there was no significance difference in the importance of achievement and success, perfectionists were more likely to rate that it was important for others to perceive them as successful. This study focuses on achievement and it is important to note that the study reflects perfectionists, unlike the others surveyed, are critical even when their goals are met. Outside opinions and lack of self-esteem cause perfectionists to be dissatisfied with their achievement if it is not completed the “perfect” way.

Neumeisters, et al (2007) believe that sources of perfectionist learning range from parent to peers. Parents assert perfectionist behaviors on their children in two ways. In one, the child internalizes unreasonable expectations in academics, sports or life achievements and then begins to set unreasonable goals for himself; thus developing perfectionist tendencies (Saboonchi & Lundh, 1999). Another way parents can create perfectionism in their children is through excessive criticism (Saboonchi & Lundh, 1999). Thus people who are highly critical of themselves are considered perfectionists.

Peer influence is another cause of perfectionism (Saboonchi & Lundh, 1999). When children see gifted peers acting as perfectionists they may begin to look up to these peers for their high standards. Also many perfectionists are highly critical of people around them and often expect high outcomes from their peers as well as themselves. This peer pressure and comparison of self to high achievers, often working together can assist in the manifestation of perfectionism in students (Neumeister, et al, 2007). Neumeister et al (2007) conducted a study on high school perfectionists who attended a private school for high achievers. In this school, grades and class rank were not given. The students at this school live there without their parents. The researchers believed that with the absence of normal pressures the perfectionist behaviors would lessen. Even after attending the school for years, it was found that perfectionism still persisted in these high achieving teens. An additional study was completed by Neumeister (2003) on causes of perfectionism where college students were given a rating scale to determine their category of perfectionism (if any). The students that scored high in perfectionist tendencies were asked to reflect on how their own perfectionism developed. In this study the students attributed their manifestation many facets. Some discussed their lack of experience of failure in their early school years; others believed their perfectionism was due to the pressures of their perfectionist parents. Another group reported that they modeled perfectionist behaviors from their parents or mentors. All of the students attributed their feelings of perfectionism to be exaggerated by outside forces and opinions (Neumeister, 2003). Like the high school group, the college students had left the influences of their parents but their perfectionists' thoughts and behaviors remained.

Based on the research it can be concluded that perfectionism is a collaborated effect that is innate, but is exaggerated (or becomes negative) based on environmental factors. It is very clear that perfectionists' thoughts and behaviors develop at an early age. Even when the "causes" of this line of thinking are taken away, students still have perfectionist thoughts and beliefs. Society, parental influences and even peer pressure lead to higher perfectionist tendencies in gifted learners (Chang, 2007). Gifted students are more likely to experience pressure from peers and parents to achieve highly from an early age. Like the college students in Neumeister's (2003) study many gifted students do not experience failure at an early age because they are not challenged. Students who are pushed to achieve higher and are only praised for "perfect" work hyper- focus on these perfect achievements. Over time perfectionism will present in the student.

Perfectionism in the Classroom.

Gifted learners who are perfectionists, show these qualities in a myriad of ways. Some learners become debilitated at the thought of a product not reaching their high standards so they procrastinate or not do their work for fear of failure (Adelson, 2007). These students may have creative ideas but for fear of failure they do not proceed (Reis, 2004). Many times low self-perception inhibits the children from even beginning projects or assignments. It is their fear of failure and self-criticism that prevents gifted learners from starting (Adelson, 2007; Tippy & Burnham, 2009). These children may think "Why bother if it will not be perfect?" (Cross & Cross, 2012). Thus, when faced with this challenge, the gifted learners often fall short (Adelson, 2007) instead of rising to the challenge presented to them.

Many students focus on what they cannot do as opposed to what they can do. They are plagued by the impact of their physical development or limitations on their endeavors (Adelson, 2007). Gifted children tend to have friends that are older than them, and because of this their physical abilities may be behind their like-minded peers (Adelson, 2007). While they are mentally similar to their liked minded peers, the younger gifted children are will be behind in sports abilities and even physical activities such as hand writing. They will avoid any activity that allows their weaknesses to be exposed (Pruett, 2004). Fearing the inability to achieve their standards and ideals, they may decide to not even attempt the physical task. These children do not like to stand out in athletic activities or even artistic abilities striving to be the best at everything they do; however, when they cannot be the best at every sport or physical activity, they become very critical of themselves and of those whom they wanted to impress, especially a parent or another peer (Reis, 2004). When they cannot reach their ideal standard they are often immobilized (Chan, 2010).

Another way perfectionism is seen is in the student who focuses on achieving 100% accuracy on every piece of work; this is probably the most recognized perfectionist trait. These students exhibit negative perfectionism in their academic endeavors. They have unrealistically high expectations for their own achievement that normally set them up for failure. They are highly self-critical and are not easily satisfied with their own work (Chan 2010). They may not even be satisfied with a perfect score and literally strive for extra credit on everything, because a score of 100 is not enough for them (Adelson, 2007). These children may also have traits of obsessive-compulsive behaviors (Chan, 2007), require extensive revisions and redos, and they may take longer on work because they are constantly erasing and reevaluating their work (Adelson, 2007).

Many gifted perfectionists have strong family expectations (Chan, 2005). Often, parents request extra work for these children because the children communicate that they feel they are failing when they do not receive 100% on test or class work (Adelson, 2007). Thoughts of perfect behavior create an unhealthy manifestation in a child's life. When the child is unable to achieve their "perfect" standards a low self-image is developed. High score perfectionists focus only on their failure and not their successes. The perfectionism behaviors can be considered "neurotic perfectionism" (Chan, 2007) which may lead to many self-image problems (Reis, 2004).

Interventions

While little or no research has been done on perfectionism in early learners, much is known about how to support and help older perfectionists. Perfectionism will develop and become an uncontrollable impulse if young students do not develop coping skills. Procrastinating perfectionists need help prioritizing their work. They need assistance in breaking tasks into manageable parts so they will not feel overwhelmed with making each task perfect (Adelson, 2007). Many of these children become excited at the prospect of finishing a task; they have great ideas and seem motivated (Cross & Cross, 2012). Yet, they have trouble getting a started because they do not believe they can carry out the task the way they imagine it or because they are intimidated by difficulty of the task (Adelson, 2007). Teachers can help these learners by breaking down tasks and scaffolding difficult or seemly overwhelming tasks.

Perfectionist learners have not experienced challenging and healthy failures. Because their early schoolwork was below their ability level, they learned to achieve perfection

effortlessly. As a result, they held an unrealistically high expectation of themselves, regardless of the academic task (Neumeister, et al 2007). When teachers, parents and peers view gifted students as high test scorers, gifted students' perception may be that they are valued for what they do, not for who they are (Adelson, 2007). This idea can manifest and make risk-taking an immobilizing task. This is why it is important that gifted learners are challenged at an early age. They need to experience failure in a positive constructive way and learn how to cope with difficult task early in life.

Counseling can also help negative perfectionists learn how to cope with these high expectations (Cross & Cross, 2012). Over twenty percent of students seeking counseling do so for perfectionist tendencies (Ashby & Bruner, 2005). The National Counseling Society often categorizes perfectionism as an anxiety disorder due to the amount of stress it causes an individual (Gnilka, Ashby, & Noble, 2012). A counselor can help a perfectionist person to learn how to direct his perfectionism in a positive way. In severe cases, anti-anxiety medication lessens the fear of mistakes in an individual. All of these methods are focused to lessen the person's obsession over mistakes and the need to be perfect. In a school setting children who experience high levels of perfectionist behaviors may need a counselor's help (Gnilka, Ashby, & Noble, 2012). When a child experiences high anxiety and obsessive-compulsive uncontrolled behaviors a counselor intervention is needed. In a group or one on one setting the child can learn how to turn around his unhealthy thinking patterns and make them positive. Besides the classroom teacher or parent, group therapy can give the child extra support and opportunities to practice healthy coping strategies.

Perfectionist behaviors do not start out as extreme (Cross, & Cross, 2012); it is important to recognize the early signs of perfectionist behaviors before the thoughts and actions of the individual manifest to unhealthy habits. While counseling is an effective treatment, interventions should be started much sooner. Teachers and parents need to work together in identifying and redirecting young perfectionists. Early identification and intervention strategies may help ease students' perfectionist behaviors. Introducing young perfectionists to coping strategies will prepare these students for a successful fulfilling life. This study explored best practices for coping with perfectionist behaviors in young gifted students.

Research Questions

After reviewing the literature it became apparent that other questions needed to be addressed:

- 1) What factors account for perfectionism in gifted children?
- 2) How is perfectionism perceived at school?
- 3) What does perfectionism look like in an early learner?
- 4) What strategies work best for helping young perfectionist develop coping strategies?

Methodology

This original action research was conducted on perfectionism in gifted learners in a first grade classroom in Virginia. Before conducting this research a thorough review was

conducted about perfectionism. The literature provided answers to questions one, two and three (1) *What factors account for perfectionism in gifted children?* 2) *How is perfectionism manifested at school?* 3) *What does perfectionism look like in an early learner?* By researching factors that are thought to affect or exaggerate perfectionism, research findings were compared to discover the patterns that surface across different age groups. These findings can be applied to younger students who exhibit perfectionist tendencies.

Informal Gifted Identification

Five of the twenty-two students in my class exhibit signs of early giftedness. Out of the five, three students are male and two are female. One is African American, one child is Arab and three are Caucasian. One of these students is trilingual and is considered English as a Second language student; another student is bilingual. Student L, J, C and P were given the Woodcock Johnson and scored in the 90 percentile or higher for intelligence. Student C, L, J, M and P all score high marks on benchmark tests, and contribute to class discussion in a meaningful and insightful way. Student L is currently being tested for gifted services, while Student J and P are on monitored status. Based on these factors these five students would be considered gifted by the school system.

Identifying Perfectionists

To answer question four, I conducted research in my first grade classroom with twenty-two first graders. There were eleven girls and twelve boys. I obtained permission to conduct the research from the University of Mary Washington's Internal Review Board before the research was initiated. Consent and assent forms were collected from parents

and students in order to use the students' work (see Appendix A and Appendix B). Twenty parents consented to the use of their child's responses for the research. After receiving consent I began collecting responses from all the students in the class during their daily journaling. The children were given prompts to reflect on. Teacher observations were also recorded. It is important to keep the students' experience as authentic as possible to ensure genuine results from the journals (Adelson, 2007). Student journals as well as teacher observations were used to identify children at risk for perfectionism.

The children wrote reflective journal responses to questions related to how they feel and cope with success and failures in their lives. These questions and prompts were adapted from the *Multidimensional Perfectionist Scale* developed by Frost, Marten, Lahart and Rosenblate (2006), a well known tool to measure perfectionism in teens and adults. This scale asked the subject a series of questions that they rate on a scale of one to six. It has shown to be a valid way to determine perfectionist tendencies in concern over mistakes, personal standards, parental expectations, parental criticism, doubts about actions, and organization (Egan, Piek, Dyck & Kane, 2011). The statements the test use were adapted to question format for the first grade students and presented in an age appropriate format. The children were given one prompt each day for five days and their responses were recorded in their journals. The prompts were: "I am successful when..." "Mistakes mean_____" , " I am a good person when_____" , "What does it mean to be perfect?" , and "My parents want me to try hard, or get it perfect?"

To help identify the emerging or potential perfectionist, as the teacher-researcher, I collected evidence by journaling my own observations of behaviors, reactions and

responses. This also included conversations with students about their responses to journal prompts. Examples of perfectionist behaviors included repetitive redo's, procrastination, and perfectionist statements. I made note of students exhibiting these traits. Based on the students' responses to the prompts, I used the scale to determine the presence of perfectionist behaviors in my students. I found that five students in my classroom exhibited perfectionist tendencies.

Classroom Interventions

For the second stage of the research I adapted coping strategies for the first graders with perfectionist tendencies. Then I attempted to help the identified children work through their perfectionist thoughts using the strategies scaffolding, time constraints and positive failure experiences to assist the students in developing their coping skills (Adelson, 2007). This was done by increasing the difficulty of the tasks and expectations of all my students, allowing for an increase in positive failure experiences. A positive failure experience is when the child experiences failure, but is then given the steps to cope with that experience. For example, when the students gets an answer wrong on an assignment the teacher will make the incorrect answer a learning experience. She will give support to the student and show that a wrong answer is not always a negative experience. Having more positive failures will decrease the fear of failure in students (Neumeister, et al, 2007). The students were praised on their effort even when they failed.

To reduce the number of redo's we talked about rough drafts and how it does not need to be perfect. When given tasks, I set a timer for an appropriate amount of time. The whole class was expected to finish in the amount of time allotted. The scaffolding method is

a technique to slowly change students thinking about their high expectations (Adelson, 2007). I helped the students in their thought process when attempting a new task. By modeling how to complete a task in a timely manner the students can then mirror these behaviors.

Students also used “self talks” to prevent obsessive behaviors to help monitor excessive attention to detail (Adelson, 2007). I adapted this strategy by allowing the entire class to discuss the process of finishing an activity before beginning tasks. We discussed what to do first, second, third etc. until the task was completed. When a student got stuck, we would go over what the whole group discussed. The scaffolding method is a technique to slowly change students thinking about their high expectations. By modeling how to complete a task in a timely manner the student can then begin mirroring these behaviors. They used “self talks” to prevent obsessive behaviors and can even use timers to help monitor excessive attention to detail (Adelson, 2007).

During the second week of research all these strategies were used for whole group instruction before and during every task. In the third week the children were still praised for effort, but the other supports began to fade. The class discussed the steps for completing a task for writing only. When a perfectionist child became frustrated I directed him/her to outline the steps toward completion.

The last week of the study the children were not given any reminders of coping strategies during whole group instruction. The children were given the same questions as in the first week of the study: “I am successful when...” “Mistakes mean_____” , “ I am a good person when_____” , “What does it mean to be perfect?” and “My parents want me

to try hard, or get it perfect.” Throughout the four weeks I recorded perfectionist comments and behaviors observed in the students.

Analysis of Results

Pre Intervention Responses

By looking at the pre responses it is easy to distinguish perfectionist’s thoughts from the thoughts of others. Perfectionists focus on what is done the “right way” (Cross & Cross, 2012) and they lose focus of the final product. They also obsess over mistakes leading to many redo’s and leading to the inability to finish work (Adelson, 2007). When the students were prompted to answer the question “I am successful when...” Student D answered “...when I try my best.” Student F also answered “...when I am a good person.” However, the students who had early signs of perfectionism answered the question focused not on the results or their attempt, but their perception of “perfect.” Student P responded, “I am successful when things are done right. I know they are right because they are best. I am successful when everything is 100% on a test.” Similarly, Student L responded, “I am successful when I get everything right. When my teacher gives a star or puts 100% on my test.” These responses indicate perfectionist thoughts.

Another sign of perfectionism is redo’s (Adelson, 2007). A perfectionist will obsess over mistakes until the task is completed the “right way.” To assess this component the class responded to the prompt, “Mistakes mean_____.” Student G wrote “Mistakes mean that I hit my brother and then I say sorry.” Student I wrote “Mistakes mean I went home on yellow.” Student behaviors were measured by colors, green, yellow and red (green

being well behaved and red being not behaving), thus Student I referred to his behavior as not outstanding in class that day. In contrast to these typical responses I found that Student C stated, "Mistakes mean I have done it wrong. I will do it again and make it right." Student L and Student J had similar responses. These responses show that the students could not leave a mistake uncorrected. They would continue to work until they completed a task that matched their standards. In my observations I noticed behaviors that matched these responses. Student S asked if she could take her work out during recess so she could finish it the "right way." Student J would not come to the carpet when it was time to change subjects because his letters were not written exactly right. Student C misheard directions and completed a task slightly different than the other students. Even though I accepted her work, she spent her free time redoing the assignment to meet the first requirement. These behaviors are also seen in adults and high school students who scored high on the *Multidimensional Perfectionist Scale* (Neumeister, et al 2007).

Perfectionist thoughts of failure lead to low self esteem (Gnilka, Ashby, & Noble, 2012). This was measured when the students were asked to journal about the question "I am a good person when_____." Most of the students wrote responses similar to Student K "... I help others. I help my little sister read." However, students who tie self-worth to perfection had a different focus on their answers. Student P wrote "I am a good person when I get everything right." Similarly Student M wrote "I am a good person when my paper says 100%." These behaviors are also seen in adult and teenage perfectionists (Adelson, 2007; Neumeister, et al 2007). Self-esteem is strongly tied to performance in perfectionists (Chang, 2005). Many perfectionists do not put much value in effort or even achievement if the outcome results in a process that is not completed "perfectly"

(Neumeister, 2003). Not only was this reported in older students with perfectionist behaviors but seen in the first grade emergent perfectionists as well showing that low self worth is a strong tie to early perfectionists.

The students were also asked “What does it mean to be perfect?” This question was used to gauge how important obtaining the perfect image was to students. Perfectionists put a lot of time and energy into being perceived as perfect (Pruett, 2004). Students not exhibiting perfectionist behaviors wrote responses about receiving 100% on a test or behaving. Several students gave responses that exhibited the importance of “perfect” in their lives. Student S wrote an entire page about perfect, some statements included “Perfect means I am the best. Perfect means everything is nice. Perfect means I am wonderful.” These statements are a clear representation of how important perfection is to this student. On the *Multidimensional Perfectionist Scale* similar statements are found. People who highly agree with these statements are considered perfectionists (Neumeister, et al 2007). These students’ responses are similar to the thoughts of adults and teens who exhibit perfectionist behaviors (Cross & Cross, 2012).

Parental influence is thought to be a factor in the development of perfectionism (Chan, 2005). Perfectionist parents are more likely to produce perfectionist children (Chan, 2005; Cross, & Cross, 2012; Hibbard & Walton, 2012; Neumeister, et al 2007). To assess the level of parental ideas perceived by the students I used the prompt “My parents want me to try hard, or to get it perfect.” Similar to responses from college students who exhibited perfectionist behaviors (Neumeister, 2003), the perfectionist students’ responses focuses on perfectionism. Student M had a difficult time choosing between the responses

and finally he wrote “My mom wants me to be perfect. If I am perfect then I have tried hard.” Student S wrote “My parents want me to be perfect. When I am perfect everyone is happy.” These alarming responses show the influence of parental perception. Projection of extremely high expectations, and receiving praise and acknowledgement only on perfect work or actions led to the development of perfectionist thoughts and behaviors (Neumeister, 2003). Although it was not reflected in their journaling, additional students showed parental influences of perfectionist thoughts in actions and statements observed. For example when Student L missed one word on a difficult spelling test, he was reduced to tears because he felt his father would “be mad at him for not getting all the words correct.” Student M refused to bring home a test on which he received a 90% because his mother would “not like it.” Fear of disappointment, and praise on perfection and not effort is a strong factor in these children’s lives, similar to the tendencies found in adults and older children with perfectionist behaviors (Chan, 2005; Neumeister et al 2007).

Many action and statements were observed that did not fit under the prompts provided. One action that is commonly seen which perfectionists is the refusal to complete a task when the perfectionist knows it cannot be completed perfectly (Adelson, 2007). For example Student P was a participant in the First Grade Spelling Bee. She asked the judges not to give her a word that had the letter R in it because she could not pronounce her r’s the “right way.” When she was given a word she was unsure of, instead of sounding out the word, she refused to even attempt the word. She left the stage and did not continue in the Bee. Student J was asked why he knew the answer to a math problem; he refused to answer, not sure what was being asked of him. When I asked him later why he would not respond he said he would only answer if he “knew the right way to answer”. Student C

refuses to use words in her writing that she does not know how to spell. When she asks the teacher to spell a word for her, she is prompted to “sound out” the word. Unlike other students Student C will either think of a different word to use that she can spell, or completely change the sentence in order to use words she knows how to spell correctly. Additionally, when challenged with difficult problems and situations in the classroom, Student P, M, J, L and C all waited for others to respond before they gave an answer. Fear of doing something wrong has been noted as a characteristic of perfectionist adults (Chan, 2007).

Not all the perfectionist students exhibited all of the factors that contributed to perfectionism. Unlike adults, where perfectionism is fully developed, I found that young students were emergent perfectionists. Because the behaviors of early perfectionists are developing there can be an inconsistency in their perfectionist thoughts and actions. However, it was clear that children as young as six have perfectionist thoughts and behaviors similar to older children and adult perfectionists.

Post Intervention Responses

Following the first week I began putting in place the interventions mentioned above. While most of the interventions were administered whole group it is significant to note that they were directed at the five students exhibiting perfectionist behaviors.

To measure the effectiveness of the interventions the students were asked to journal about the same questions given to them before the interventions. First they were asked “I am successful when_____.” Originally the perfectionists’ responses were

focused on tasks being completed perfectly or “just right.” The intervention used for this line of thinking was to praise students for their effort, not perfection and to allow opportunities for challenging experiences. These students received work that was challenging and only received praised for working hard. When they were asked to journal about this question again the answers were different. Student C wrote “I am successful when I know I tried my best.” She reported that it was “Alright if the answers were not all right.” Similarly Student L reported that his success could be “getting a 100%. Successful is when you try hard.” While students still strive to obtain the “perfect” grade, they have learned to feel successful even when they did not receive a perfect score.

Students who were reluctant to participate due to fear of failure began experiencing positive failure experience. In the classroom they were praised for effort and not excellence. Some of the students showed growth in coping skills. Student K began to answer even when he was unsure of the “right answer.” Three out of the five students risk taking behaviors increased over the three week period. For example Student C, who before would avoid writing words she did not know how to spell, began to write and misspell words telling me “That’s the best I can spell it.” Student L and J began answering open ended math questions and sometimes got wrong answers. Student L reported that he was “happy because he tried.” The success in this intervention was also measured by how the students felt about mistakes made in the prompt “Mistakes mean_____.” Before the intervention perfectionists viewed mistakes as an extremely negative experience, while afterwards many of their opinions changed. Student M wrote, “Mistakes mean that I have learned,” while Student L wrote, “Mistakes mean you make a mistake and that is ok.” The

students began viewing making mistakes as a part of learning instead of a shameful experience.

Self-esteem is developed many ways. Many perfectionists have low self-esteem because they view themselves as unable to reach high set goals (Adelson, 2007). Many of these goals are set so high because children do not experience failure or challenge early in life (Neumeister, 2003). The interventions used to correct this provided the perfectionists challenges that were otherwise lacking in their early experiences and then demonstrating that effort and determination was valued. This was done to increase self-esteem using effort instead of ability. In the classroom there are several programs that measure unlimited growth in reading and in math. The students in the classroom would be notified and celebrate whenever a child showed growth and effort, they were not praised for their levels. By focusing on growth and learning, it was communicated that effort is more important than perfection. Including observations, the success of this intervention was measured by comparing the pre and post answers given to the following prompt: "I am a good person when_____." Prior to the first intervention the perfectionists' responses included being completely correct and being perfect. After the intervention the answers changed. Student L and J's answers focused on being a good friend. Student J wrote "I am a good person when I help my friends." Similarly Student P wrote "I am a good person when I say good job to others." While these answers seem general it is important to note that they are no longer "perfect" focused.

The next prompt was used to measure the importance of "perfect" in a student's life. A perfectionist adult or teenager focuses on things being "just right" in their life

(Neumister, 2003). A challenge in coping with perfectionism is the ability to accept when things do not go as perfectly as planned (Neihart, Reis, Robinson, & Moon, 2002). Again the intervention used for this behavior was to allow the perfectionist to fail. They were given experiences that were difficult for their skill set in academic and physical areas then praised on their effort. To measure whether the perfectionists' priorities had changed they were asked to respond to the prompt, "What does it mean to be perfect?" Unlike the other interventions the perfectionists' responses did not show much change. Student S wrote "Perfect means doing things right. Perfect means being right." Student M wrote "Perfect means I am right. Perfect means I am good." Unfortunately, these view points are difficult to change (Neihart, et al, 2002). It is unclear whether or not the value placed on perfect will change for a perfectionist (Adelson, 2007), but the reactions and effect felt by perfectionists can change (Neihart, et al, 2007). It is difficult to say if more time would help these perfectionists value change on the ideals for perfect.

Finally change in parental perception was measured by using the prompt, "My parents want me try hard, or get it perfect." Parental involvement was not used during this study, however the goal of the intervention was to increase self worth and acceptance in failure. Again the interventions of praise and opportunity for failure were used to increase effort over being perfect. Less than half of the perfectionists' opinion changed. Student S wrote " My parents want me to try my best," Where before her best was reflected in being perfect, now she is focused on effort; Student C's responses were similar. However, Student M wrote a similar response to his first answer, "My mom wants me to try hard. My mom wants it to be perfect." While Student L did not reflect this in his journaling, he continued to become upset when he did not earn perfect scores in fear of his father's

disappointment. Perceptions of parental expectations is a major part of developing perfectionism (Frost, et al 2006; Neumister et al, 2007), and it is difficult to change within the classroom.

Conclusions

Like other obsessive-compulsive disorders perfectionism is multifaceted. It is important to understand that these symptoms are both innate and developed over time (Neihart, et al, 2002). Perfectionists need to develop coping strategies at an early age, allowing them ample time to practice and suppress the manifestation of negative perfectionism (Chan, 2005). In this study it was shown that perfectionism is present in children as young as six years old. The first graders showed behaviors such as fear of anything imperfect, multiple redo's, and an unrealistic expectation of achievement similar to behaviors found in upper elementary perfectionists (Adelson, 2002).

A major contributing factor to perfection is the lack of experience of a challenge at an early age. In this study the symptoms of fear of new experiences decreased in children who had a higher rate of challenges in school. Another factor of perfectionism is the perception that everything must be completed "perfectly" or it is wrong (Neihart, et al 2002). This was addressed by the intervention of praising effort over correctness, and using programs that showed limitless growth so that learning was praised over intellect. This changed the classroom climate and allowed perfectionists to shift their focus from correctness to learning. Perfectionists need examples early in their schooling which focus on healthy attitudes toward success and perfection. It is clear that in this study

perfectionists could learn to feel successful by putting forth effort and achieve a greater self-esteem through these methods.

However, it is impossible to deny that parents have the greatest influence on children. Parents were not asked to intervene in their child's perfectionist behaviors at home. This could account for the lack of change in perception in parental approval and the importance of "perfect" in the students' lives. Overall it can be concluded that intervention is necessary in the classroom in order for perfectionists to grow.

Recommendations

In conclusion, the importance of this study was to prove that intervention in the classroom impacts the development of gifted perfectionists. The root of perfectionist behaviors come from early experiences (Neumeister, 2003), and modeled behaviors (Cross & Cross, 2012). This is why it is important for classroom teachers to provide challenging experiences for gifted students in their classrooms (Adelson, 2007). The obsession and manifestation of perfectionism is developed early in life (Ashby & Bruner, 2005). Without coping strategies, perfectionism can manifest and control a person's life. When it consumes a person's thoughts so that he/she can never reach obtainable goals, that perfectionist develops a low self-image and a life time of underachievement. Perfectionism has been linked to obsessive-compulsive disorder, anxiety, depression, eating disorders and even suicide (Neihart, 2002). To avoid these devastating outcomes it is important for teachers and parents to work together to suppress these feelings in young children.

Teachers need to provide a classroom environment that praises effort over perfect papers and provide tasks with limitless growth opportunity. The gifted student needs to be challenged and motivated in order to become successful later in life (Neihart, et al 2002). Perfectionist students require challenging experiences. Students who never experience failure have no practice in appropriately coping with it no matter how small (Adelson, 2002). Perfectionists are not to be left alone but need guidance to fulfill their emotional needs. With adult example and encouragement perfectionists can change their behaviors and learn to cope with “imperfect” results.

Recommendations for further research in this study are as follows. This study could be expanded to include a greater variety of students in order to obtain greater results. When the interventions are used school wide instead of a classroom more patterns could emerge in the effectiveness of interventions across grade levels. Additionally, the *Multidimensional Perfectionist Scale* could be simplified and used for younger students. The scale could be adapted to include three choices instead of a Likert scale of agree or disagree, and the statements could be simplified and condensed. Using a survey along with observations and journaling would give more in-depth information about the views of being perfect in students.

The study may show more success if completed over a longer period of time and if it included efforts from parents and support staff in the school. In this study it is unclear if the values developed in the interventions have longevity. It is also unclear how long interventions need to occur before the perfectionists behaviors are lessened for life. It

would be interesting to see the long term effect of a collaborative effort over several years using these interventions from kindergarten to high school graduation.

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Appendix A

INFORMED CONSENT PARENT PERMISSION LETTER

Dear Parent or Guardian,

This year I am conducting a research study entitled “Early Intervention of Perfectionist Behaviors in the Gifted Learner” with first grade students at Hugh Mercer Elementary School. I am interested in examining children with perfectionist tendencies. Ultimately, my hope is to learn how to prevent exaggeration of perfectionist thoughts. I am requesting that you allow your student to participate.

Participants in the study will be asked to journal, which is an activity that is done daily in the classroom. Participants will also be asked to try strategies that will allow them to complete activities without the anxiety of perfectionist thoughts. The total time to participate in the study will be approximately 20 minutes a day. Students who participate will complete the study during our regular writing time. (There will be no loss of academic class time.) There are no foreseeable risks to participating in the study.

Names will be changed when used throughout the study’s so all responses will be confidential. No one at Hugh Mercer School will have access to any of the information collected. Responses will be kept at the University of Mary Washington accessible only to the researchers.

Participation in the study is entirely voluntary and there will be no penalty for not participating. All students for whom I have parent consent will be asked if they wish to participate and only those who agree will I collect the journaling. Since this is a regular class activity all students will complete the journaling, but only those consented will be used in data collection. Moreover, participants will be free to stop taking part in the study at any time.

University of Mary Washing’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) has approved this study. Should you have any questions about the study please contact Dr. Abeel at [540-286-8082](tel:540-286-8082)

Please give your permission by signing the bottom of this consent form and having your child return it to tomorrow. Please keep this letter for your records.

Sincerely,

Amanda Flanagan
University of Mary Washington

I give my permission for my child _____ to participate in the study mentioned above.

(Parent or guardian signature)

(Date)

(researcher's signature)

(Date)

Appendix B

ASSENT FORM FOR A CHILD

You are being invited to participate in a research study. We are doing this to learn more about perfectionism in children. If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked questions about how you feel and think about your work. You will also be asked to try new ways of thinking.

We will keep everything you tell me is private. But if you tell me that you have feelings of hurting yourself or someone else, I will have to tell someone about that. If you tell me someone hurt you, I would have to tell someone about that too, but not the person who hurt you.

If you agree to be in the study, we will ask you try new ways of thinking and write about how you feel. If you have any questions, you can ask Amanda Flanagan who is conducting this study.

You do not have to be in the study, and you can stop if you do not want to do it, at any time. Everything you do for the study is part of the activities for everyone in the class. If you do not want to be in the study, I will not include your journal responses or any observations about you. If you agree to be in the study, I will use a fake name for you and keep your identity private. Whether you agree or not, your grades and assignments will not be affected.

Child's Assent: I have been told about the study and know why it is being done and what I will be asked to do. I also know that I do not have to do it if I do not want to. If I have questions, I can ask Amanda Flanagan. I can stop at any time.

My parents/guardians know that I am being asked to be in this study.

PLEASE SIGN THE BOTTOM OF THIS PAGE IF YOU AGREE TO BE IN THIS STUDY.

SIGN BELOW TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY.

Child's Signature

Date

Child's Name (printed)

(Researcher's signature)

(Date)